



## Turkey's New Anti-PKK Strategy: Consequences and Feasibility

Karol Wasilewski

*The Turkish government, empowered further by the state of emergency, adopted a new strategy in its fight with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The declared goal is the total liquidation of the PKK. It will contribute to deepening political polarisation at home while in the regional dimension it may lead to greater Turkish involvement in Iraq and Syria. It is also possible that the strategy will intensify the tension between Turkey and its Western allies. Both the situation in Turkey and in the region make the achievement of the Turkish politicians' goal dubious.*

**Old Conflict, New Mode.** In July 2015, a two-plus year peace process between Turkey and the PKK (considered a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the EU and the U.S.) ended. The breakdown in negotiations was caused both by developments in the region and in Turkey, in particular, the siege of Kobanî by Islamic State (IS) and Turkey's parliamentary elections in June 2015. Both developments highlighted the differences of interests between the sides.

On 22 July 2015, PKK members killed two Turkish policemen in Ceylanpınar, which provoked Turkey to bomb PKK positions in Iraq, resuming the conflict. This new phase, however, is different than previous ones in several ways. First, the PKK decided to carry the fight to Turkey's southeastern cities. Turkish security forces picked up the gauntlet and responded heavily. Second, the wide use of radicalised youth through the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (tied to the PKK) was a novelty in the conflict as well. Other organisations affiliated with the PKK, such as the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, intensified their activities. Third, the conflict has been waged in unique circumstances. The primary influence was regional dynamics, principally the Kurdish Democratic Union Party's (PYD) success in northern Syria (although PYD is linked to the PKK, Turkey views it as a Syrian branch of the PKK). Also significant was the use of social media, used as part of an information war.

These new modes of this old conflict have led to a surge in the number of civilian deaths, massive urban destruction in the southeast, and deepening of political polarisation in Turkey. At the moment, the total number of casualties because of the fighting is hard to pin down as both sides in the conflict use statistics as propaganda. However, the large scale of the confrontation can be seen by looking at the number of internally displaced people. According to the International Crisis Group, it has exceeded 350,000.

**New Strategy: "Total Liquidation."** The failed 15 July coup in Turkey became an important turning point in the Turkey-PKK conflict. The Turkish authorities decided to toughen its stance towards both the organisation and the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. An early sign of this may have been when the pro-Kurdish Democratic People's Party (HDP) was excluded from government actions aimed at muting tensions in the domestic politics. The HDP's leaders were not invited to meetings with the prime minister or president, nor to a huge political meeting in Yenikapı. Moreover, there were some subtle changes in the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rhetoric. After the coup, Turkey's leaders equated the PKK with the Gülen movement, which it accuses of staging the attempted overthrow. Furthermore, they started to emphasise that "Turkey has no Kurdish problem, just a PKK problem." The authorities' stance toughened even more after the introduction of a state of emergency on 20 July. The government seized the authority to issue decrees that later served to dismiss southeastern city mayors who were suspected of links to the PKK and thus accused of supporting terrorism (on 11 September, 28 or so mayors were removed). It seems that the wide powers granted by the state of emergency have made Turkish leaders believe that their stated goal of the total liquidation of the PKK is possible.

The new strategy combines military, economic and political actions. On the military front, the authorities want to intensify the fight by transitioning to offensive actions consisting of increasing the mobility of units battling the PKK and supported by armed drones. The aim of this is to exert permanent military pressure on the PKK. Moreover, the security forces will be strengthened, including building up so-called village guard units, a paramilitary structure that recruits mainly ethnic Kurds with the aim to defend local civilians against the PKK. In the economic sphere, the authorities will try to hit PKK sources of funding. As important will be a project to renew urban areas devastated by the ongoing conflict. The government aims to allocate around \$3.5 billion to this work. In politics, the authorities have taken aim at NGOs, media and politicians suspected of having links to the PKK. The government's actions here seek to create an atmosphere that keeps people sympathetic to the PKK in check. It is also possible that in the future, the Turkish leaders will try to create an alternative to the HDP and a more AKP-leaning Kurdish political front.

The strategy is not limited to Turkish territory. President Erdoğan has claimed that the offensive's aim is to hit the terrorist organisation at its sources. This means that military activities will be carried out on Syrian and Iraqi territory, where the PKK is very active. The Turkish government will also try to isolate the PKK in Iraq and diminish the PYD's influence in Syria. To achieve this goal, it will try to cooperate with Masoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, who for years has had strained relations with the PKK. In this aspect, the new strategy fits in with the government's previous actions aimed at intensifying intra-Kurdish divisions both at home and in the region.

The Turkish government, using the powers granted by the state of emergency, has already started to implement the new strategy. Closing Kurdish media and arresting HDP leaders such as Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ are signs of that. Likewise, the use of drones to fight the PKK has intensified of late and the strengthening of units in the Silopi district near the Turkey-Iraq border may be a sign that the Turkish government is considering military intervention in northern Iraq.

**Consequences and Possibilities.** When it comes to Turkey, the effect of the strategy will probably be increased political polarisation. This, in turn, may pose a threat to the country's security, since the IS strategy towards Turkey is to stir up division within Turkish society and make use of it for its own ends. Moreover, hitting the political side of the Kurdish movement, in addition to banning pro-Kurdish associations and closing media outlets, may result in the radicalisation of some Kurds (in the last election, HDP won more than 5 million votes). It is also probable that the PKK will intensify its actions, including killings of officials appointed by the government to replace the dismissed mayors. At the same time, the strategy may lead to the consolidation of the AKP's and Erdoğan's electorate, resulting in strengthening the government's position.

In the regional dimension, the strategy requires an increase in Turkish actions on Iraqi and Syrian soil. As an example, Turkey's efforts to take part in the Mosul anti-IS operation stems in part from concerns about the PKK's presence in the cross-border Sinjar region. Thus, Turkey's tense relations with Iran, which is interested in preserving its influence over Iraq, and the central government in Bagdad may be further strained. Moreover, Turkey's anti-PKK strategy constitutes a challenge for the U.S. and its plans regarding the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts. This is a result of the Americans' close cooperation with the PYD on Syrian soil. Turkish measures aimed at the PYD may further complicate the Americans' moves during the northern Raqqa anti-IS offensive that started on 6 November. What is more, the strategy's political dimension may increase tensions between Turkey and the EU, which has expressed worry about the state of Turkey's democracy. The strain may be boosted by Turkey's accusations that Western European countries do not give it enough support in its fight with the PKK (although such allegations emerge whenever the Turkey-PKK conflict resumes). To prevent the tensions from growing further, the EU may engage in political dialogue with Turkey.

Although the Turkey's new anti-PKK strategy has many facets, achieving its declared goal may not be an easy task. First, doubts have been raised that the strategy may contribute to the radicalisation of some Kurds, which would serve the PKK's interests. Besides this, a serious deficiency of the strategy is that it seems not to take into account the significant shift in opinion on the so-called Kurdish question. Strictly speaking, it seems to ignore the fact that the PYD's intensive and effective fight with IS has brought it international sympathy and a relationship with the U.S. This, in turn, makes Turkey's strategy costlier to achieve its goals and may impede its actions, unless the incoming U.S. administration decides to change its approach to the PYD, as hoped for by Turkey. Finally, one serious obstacle to achieving the strategy's declared goals may be the condition of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) after the failed coup. Although both politicians and the military's current top commanders have offered assurances that the TSK's potential has not been diminished as a result of the widespread purges in the coup's aftermath, the next few months will show whether the military is capable of achieving the Turkish leaders' declared goal.